

## **An Index of Publisher Quality for the Academic Library**

**John Calhoun and James K. Bracken**

John Calhoun is technical services librarian, Seymour Library, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

James K. Bracken is readers services librarian, Seymour Library, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

Any subject bibliographer who has selected books from magazine reviews, like those in *Choice*, or from approval slips, like those in Baker & Taylor's program, knows the difficulty of identifying the best books from among the many described as "immensely useful," "essential," or "indispensable" — or not described at all. Ensuring the purchase of only those books which will eventually be included in *Choice's* annual "Outstanding Academic Books" list (hereinafter simply OAB) would require either monitoring all of the reviews and ordering only those which are highly recommended, or waiting until the list appears and making purchases retrospectively — and neither alternative is particularly attractive. Fortunately, however, one of the easily apprehensible features included in both the reviews and the slips is the name of the publisher, and once a bibliographer recognizes that certain publishers produce more OAB titles than others, monitoring the reviews or slips becomes a much easier task.

With a little effort, it is possible to construct a list of the sixty most often appearing OAB publishers from *Choice*, and the figures on the left side of the ratios in column 1 of table 1 show the average number of titles placed by those publishers on the five most recently available lists.<sup>1</sup> It is also possible to construct a list of the total number of titles published by each of the same firms from the "US Book Publishers" chapter in *Literary Market Place*, and the figures on the right of the ratios in column 1 show the average number of total titles per year during the same five-year period (except when followed by a smaller figure in parentheses, which indicates the number of years data was reported during that period).<sup>2</sup> By combining the figures of column 1 to form a ratio, a measurement of publisher quality (at least as seen by this one review source) can be compiled, and we give that measurement as a simple ratio in column 2.

The correlation of data from the two lists produces a qualitative measurement for only the five most recent years. Certainly the OAB titles, as well as the much larger number of total titles from any given publisher, fluctuates from one year to the next so that some publishers of quality may not be represented (especially when, like Addison-Wesley, they neglect to report total titles in *Literary Market Place*). Still, certain publishers seem to appear on the OAB lists more frequently than others: Harvard, with 18 OAB titles in 1981, also had 18 in 1980, 16 in 1979, 14 in 1978, and 18 in 1977; while Prentice-Hall, a much larger publisher, with 10 in 1981, had only 6 in 1980, 9 in 1979, 6 in 1978, and 8 in 1977. On this basis we believe that it is reasonable to conclude that the proportion of a publisher's OAB titles to its total titles is relatively constant — that is, a trustworthy guide to how much of the job has already been done for us by a rigorous editorial staff. To make the ratios a little more comprehensible, we have assigned an indexing value of 1.0 to the 1:22.7 figure enjoyed by both Oxford and Cambridge, two old and respected academic publishers that most subject bibliographers feel they "know," and have computed corresponding figures for the other publishers in column 3.

Basic Books and Free Press produce OABs at about twice the frequency of Oxford and

Cambridge; and Cornell, Harvard, Indiana, Princeton, Temple, and Yale do even better than that. A "blind" purchase by any of these publishers is liable to be a pretty good bet. Doubleday, Harper & Row, McGraw-Hill, Prentice-Hall, and Random House (the big trade publishers), on the other hand, are such poor bets (in this league) that a subject bibliographer is well advised to have a convincing review in hand before selecting a title.

**TABLE 1**

	I	II	III	IV
Academic	12.0:560	1.46.67	.49	60
Ballinger	2.0:81	1.40.50	.56	6
Barnes & Noble	2.4:91	1:38.08	.60	25
Basic	5.8:64	1:10.97	2.07	19 (+ 13)
California	15.6:197	1:12.63	1.80	57
Cambridge	18.6:425	1:22.85	1.00	115
Chicago	11.4:212	1:18.63	1.22	64
Columbia	8.8:103	1:11.66	1.93	42
Cornell	8.0:83	1:10.35	2.20	33 (+ 12)
Doubleday	5.0:616	1:123.21	.18	42 (- 15)
Free	6.2:70 (3)	1:11.29	2.02	18 (+ 17)
Freeman	3.0:55	1:18.27	1.25	22
Fortress	2.0:53	1:26.40	.86	1
Gale	3.6:125	1:34.61	.66	40
Greenwood	6.0:565	1:94.17	.24	82 (- 49)
Hall	3.6:447	1:124.28	.18	48
Halsted	5.2:277	1:55.07	.43	14
Harper & Row	7.6:1078	1:141.84	.16	72 (- 30)
Harvard	16.8:113	1:6.73	3.38	78 (+ 15)
Holmes & Meier	2.6:102	1:39.23	.58	16
Humanities	2.6:215	1:88.69	.28	22
Illinois	3.2:51	1:15.94	1.43	23
Indiana	7.0:75	1:11.09	2.40	26 (+ 12)
Johns Hopkins	6.4:97	1:15.13	1.59	38
Jossey-Bass	2.8:75	1:26.79	.85	3
Knopf	9.2:138	1:15.04	1.51	48
Lexington	2.8:157	1:56.14	.41	19
Little, Brown	5.4:297	1:55.07	.41	33
McGraw-Hill	5.2:800 (1)	1:153.85	.15	40 (- 10)
Minnesota	2.4:43	1:17.75	1.28	15
MIT	4.0:101	1:25.30	.90	35
New York	2.6:58	1:22.23	1.02	9
North Carolina	3.2:42	1:13.00	1.64	15
Norton	7.0:269	1:38.40	.59	44
Oxford	29.2:661	1:22.64	1.00	150
Pantheon	3.2:78	1:24.25	.94	21
Pergamon	3.4:345	1:101.47	.22	44
Plenum	3.8:315	1:82.89	.27	23
Praeger	3.4:194	1:56.94	.40	23
Prentice-Hall	7.8:1200 (2)	1:153.85	.15	58 (- 14)
Princeton	16.8:146	1:8.67	2.62	88 (+ 5)
Putnam's	2.8:226	1:80.64	.28	11
Random House	4.0:543	1:135.85	.17	44 (- 22)
Routledge & Kegan Paul	4.8:240 (1)	1:50.00	.46	34
Rowman & Littlefield	3.2:95 (4)	1:29.69	.77	11
Scarecrow	4.0:102	1:25.40	.90	27
Scribner's	3.4:329	1:96.76	.24	21
Southern Illinois	2.4:45	1:18.58	1.22	15
Springer-Verlag	4.4:328	1:74.55	.31	40
St. Martin's	6.6:459	1:69.55	.33	63
Temple	2.8:25	1:8.93	2.55	13 (+ 13)
Texas	3.2:56	1:17.50	1.30	13
Thames & Hudson	2.8:33 (4)	1:11.79	1.93	6
Twayne	3.2:122	1:38.19	.60	119(- 101)
Van Nostrand	3.4:284	1:83.53	.27	8
Viking	4.2:172	1:40.90	.56	37
Westview	3.4:187	1:58.44	.39	34
Wiley	12.2:779	1:63.87	.36	72
Wisconsin	2.6:36	1:13.85	1.64	10
Yale	10.6:97	1:9.11	2.50	40 (+ 19)

When we examine our own purchases over an average year (given here as column 4), we find convincing evidence which suggests we should be buying more of the first group and less of the second (exactly how many titles, based on what we were willing to buy from Oxford and Cambridge, we suggest in parentheses). We also find convincing evidence suggesting that some of our buying habits have become so calcified that they have produced bibliographical fossils reminiscent of the Jurassic Age: our Greenwood and Twayne purchases are the dinosaurs of a primeval era in acquisitions.

## REFERENCES

1. "Outstanding Academic Books 1981," *Choice* 19, no. 9 (May 1982): 1184-1200; "Outstanding Academic Books 1980," *Choice* 18, no. 9 (May 1981): 1206-1226; "Outstanding Academic Books 1979," *Choice* 17, no. 3 (May 1980): 331-52; "Outstanding Academic Books 1978," *Choice* 16, no. 3 (May 1979): 335-55; "Outstanding Academic Books 1977," *Choice* 15, no. 3 (May 1978): 339-62.
2. "US Book Publishers," *literary Market Place with Names & Numbers* 42 (1982): 1-143; "US Book Publishers," *Literary Market Place with Names & Numbers* 41 (1981): 1-137; "US Book Publishers," *Literary Market Place with Names & Numbers* 40 (1980): 1-135; "US Book Publishers," *Literary Market Place with Names & Numbers* 39 (1979): 1-126; "US Book Publishers," *Literary Market Place with Names & Numbers* 38 (1978): 1-117.